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SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR BIRD FIELD STUDY

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Introduction

The popularity of bird study today makes the way of the beginner far easier than it was a generation ago. Besides the numbers of other students to help him, there is a wealth of literature available for his use. "Portraits" in color of most species of birds are obtainable, together with several manuals for their identification, some of the latter containing field keys in which the birds are grouped according to color. Many State lists have been published, some elaborately illustrated and giving descriptions of the birds, details of their occurrence in the State, and accounts of their habits. Many lists also have been published of the birds of restricted areas, and several periodicals dealing chiefly or entirely with ornithology contain local lists. There are now many museums where collections of mounted birds of the region are exhibited and where scientific (or study) specimens may be examined.

The beauty and animation of the birds stimulate the student with a desire to know their names, and what starts as a mere pleasant pastime may lead to serious study. Also, the careful amateur observer can be of great assistance to the professional ornithologist, who has come to depend on him for many field observations.

Time to Begin

Winter or early spring is undoubtedly the best time to begin the study of birds, and late spring or summer is the poorest. In winter only the resident species and a few visitants from farther north are about, and the student is less bewildered than when the trees are full of migrants difficult to see because of the thick foliage.

Persons living outside the city (and sometimes those within its confines) often find a feeding shelf or table an excellent introduction to the birds that are thus brought close, where they can be studied more or less at leisure. The number of kinds visiting any one table is usually limited, but the repeated visits of certain individuals lead to familiar acquaintance.

Winter is also an excellent time to prepare by study for the time of greater enjoyment, when the advent of mild weather and the returning migrants tempt the student more afield. If a museum is available it should be visited as frequently as possible for the study of specimens to gain familiarity with the general appearance, relative size of each bird, and the distinctive characters described in label or handbook. When there are not museum facilities, colored pictures and descriptions are excellent substitutes.

The beginner should always bear in mind that only a part of the birds treated in any standard manual are likely to occur in his particular locality, and he should accordingly study the local list to learn which ones to expect. If no local list has ever been published the State list will be of assistance.

Equipment

The almost indispensable equipment for field study is a notebook and a pair of field or opera glasses. Any kind of a notebook can be used, and the beginner will probably try several before he decides which best suits his particular needs. Several bird notebooks are published, varying from lists of names to be checked to sheets with an outline of the bird and special headings for observations.

Because of the larger field of vision and greater ease of focusing, most beginners find opera glasses easier to use than the higher-powered field glasses. As observations become more extensive, however, and finer distinctions must be looked for, the need of a stronger glass will be felt. When buying a new glass it is advisable to get one of at least six power, with a wide field of vision. Good glasses are not cheap, and it is well to compare several pairs and make before purchasing.

A pocket manual or guide will be a convenience. By its use birds may be looked up and identified on the spot, and sometimes it is possible to check the observations and to note special markings, thus making sure of the identification and at the same time impressing the distinguishing characters on the memory.

Where and When to Go

It is seldom necessary to go far afield to find at least a few birds. Even small city parks often have several native species, while the suburban

or rural dweller has them in his dooryard. Experience will soon show what places in the neighborhood have the largest bird populations. In general, the more diversified the territory, the greater the number of kinds of birds that will be found. The edges of woods, or a brushy stream alternating with open fields and orchards, offer the greatest variety. In time, the observer will vary his trips afield, going to certain localities for special birds found there. In winter, birds are more likely to be found in warm, sheltered hollows, especially those open to the south.

Early morning and late afternoon when the birds are feeding and active are the best times for making observations. It is not, however, necessary to be out at dawn unless it is planned to accomplish a great deal; in fact, the jumble of song that follows the awakening of the birds and precedes their morning search for food, is apt to be confusing. Even in summer, birds are usually active until about eleven o'clock, and they are again active for about two hours before sunset, but during the middle of the day they are quiet and retiring. In winter and early spring, however, they are most active during the warmer part of the day.

Weather, time of day, and season affect the preference that the birds give to certain areas. In the early morning they are most likely to frequent the fields and orchards until the sun has warmed the south side of the woods, and they will be found following the sun to the north side in the afternoon. In windy weather birds are retiring and silent, usually keeping under cover in the lee of the woods, and accordingly a blustery day is not good for observations.

When going afield to watch birds, go alone or with only one or two companions. Speak only in undertones. Avoid light or conspicuously colored clothing. Move slowly and as quietly as possible, avoiding jerky or sudden motions. Stop often and stand still, listening and looking. Conceal yourself by leaning against a tree, or sit down and let the birds come to you. Have the sun at your back if possible--when a bird is against the light, it is practically impossible to distinguish its color, and even a scarlet tanager will appear black.

Field Identifications

The beginner should not expect to see and learn too much at one time. At first pay attention only to the more conspicuous birds and songs. Take careful notes on a few species at a time; do not trust to memory. The first notes will probably pertain entirely to the identification of the bird, later notes will be added on song, flight, feeding, and other habits. An outline drawing of the bird, with notations on it of color or special markings as they are seen, is a great help in identifying it. Such a drawing, however crude, with notes as to size, gives the information desired for purposes of identification without the possibility of ambiguity in the use of terms. "Larger" or "smaller" than such well-known birds as the robin and English sparrow make good bases for comparison. After a bird has been identified, study the description, memorizing the diagnostic markings. Also read as much as possible what other observers have said regarding its habits, the type of country where it is most likely to be found, its range, and its seasonal occurrence in your locality.

Note Keeping

A double system of note keeping is almost a necessity--the daily list or notes made in the field, which are transferred later to the permanent record. For this latter a loose-leaf notebook has generally been found most satisfactory, each sheet containing records of only one species. These sheets may be arranged either in the order of the A.O.U. Check-List or alphabetically, as is most convenient. The sheet is headed with the name of the species, and each day's notes are entered in order, each headed by the date and place of the observation. Notes regarding weather, nature of the locality visited, temperature, wind, etc., may be incorporated with the bird notes or kept in a separate journal. With such a system the notes on each species for a season or a lifetime can readily be brought together. Some observers keep also a file of the daily lists of birds observed, with notes of date, locality, time afield, weather, and other pertinent data.

The beginner will do better if at first he confines his efforts to identifying the birds by sight, making no special attempt to learn their songs. He will soon find that the commoner and more striking songs have unconsciously become familiar. When giving special attention to songs, however, do not let one pass without identifying it if possible. To some persons words convey the best impression of a song, and are readily entered in the notes; to others the tone quality and rhythm best express it. Songs just have to be learned; no universally satisfactory way of describing them has yet been invented.

Significance of the Study

Ornithology will always be primarily a field study, and the careful amateur can have a share in the work of the professional. He will be called upon for observations on migration, the dates of arrival and departure of the birds, and on breeding and other phases of life history, and to assist in bird banding. Photography is another phase of bird study open to amateur and professional alike. As the bird student understands the possible significance of his work his enjoyment and interest will grow and there will always be many nature lovers to whom the bird is neither a specimen nor a problem, but a live thing to be watched and enjoyed.

The amateur must, however, temper his enthusiasm with caution. The first law of field work is exact observation; snap judgment should be carefully avoided. Field observations must, therefore, be supplemented by study. The student should be thoroughly familiar with his local list, and know the descriptions of the birds regularly found in his vicinity and their seasons of occurrence. The importance of State or local lists can hardly be too much stressed. Ignorance of the status of a species in the given locality may lead to a snap identification of a bird whose rarity in that particular section calls for great care in its identification. This applies also to commoner birds that may occur before or after their regular season.

Organization

The bird lovers of a community will soon come to know each other, and some organization, however informal at first, can be most helpful to its entire membership. Besides stimulating their own interest, much can be done to awaken interest in others. Meetings for the exchange and comparison of experiences may create a rivalry in observations and at the same time serve as a check on those inclined to be over-enthusiastic in the mere making of large daily lists. If no authoritative local list is available, the combined records of such a group will soon provide the nucleus for one, and its preparation and publication should be arranged.

Group study may be organized, both indoors and in the field. Nature study in the schools may be encouraged and assisted. Meetings and lectures will help to stimulate public interest. A library may be formed, or the local public library may be urged to purchase desired books on birds.

Conservation of the birds may be helped by inducing the local authorities to set aside a certain area--even a small park or plot of wild land--as a sanctuary. Such a bird refuge soon becomes a place of local interest and a means of awakening the public to the general need for bird conservation.

Lists of Books and Pictures

Following are brief lists of books and pictures that will be especially useful to the beginner. A more detailed list will be found in Leaflet BS-2, Aids to Bird Students, which is obtainable free, on request addressed to the Biological Survey, Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

Allen, A. A. The Book of Bird Life. D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., New York, N. Y. \$3.50.

Bailey, F. M. Handbook of Birds of the Western United States. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass. \$6.

Baynes, E. H. Wild Bird Guests. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, N. Y. \$2.50.

Bralliar, F. Knowing Birds through Stories. Funk & Wagnalls Co., New York, N. Y. \$2.

Chapman, F. M. Bird Life. D. Appleton-Century Co., New York, N. Y. \$5.

----- Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America. D. Appleton-Century Co., New York, N. Y. \$5.

Hoffman, R. A Guide to the Birds of New England and Eastern New York. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass. Cloth \$3; pocket edition, fabricoid, \$4.

----- Birds of the Pacific States. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass. \$5.

Mathews, F. S. Field Book of Wild Birds and Their Music. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, N. Y. \$3.50.

- Peterson, R. T. A Field Guide to the Birds. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass. \$2.75.
- Reed, C. A. Bird Guide (in two parts): Part I, Water and Game Birds: Birds of Prey East of the Rockies; Part II, Land Birds East of the Rockies. Doubleday, Doran & Co., Garden City, N. Y. Cloth, per part, \$1.25; fabricoid, per part, \$1.50.
- Reed, C. K. Western Bird Guide. Doubleday, Doran & Co., Garden City, N. Y. \$1.75.
- Saunders, A. A. A Guide to Bird Songs. D. Appleton-Century Co., New York, N. Y. \$2.50.
- Shoffner, G. P. The Bird Book. Frederick A. Stokes Co., New York, N. Y. \$2.
- Wyman, L. E., and Burnell, E. F. Field Book of Birds of the Southwestern United States. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass. Cloth, \$3.50; leather, \$5.

Pictures

- Bird Portraits in Color: Two Hundred Ninety-five North American Species. With brief descriptions by Thomas S. Roberts. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn. Cloth, \$3.50; limp cloth, \$2.50; in portfolio without text, \$1.50.
- Birds of New York. Plates. University of State of New York, Albany, N. Y. \$1.25.
- Educational Leaflets, Bird Charts, and Pictures in Color. National Association of Audubon Societies, 1775 Broadway, New York, N. Y.
- Fifty Common Birds of Farm and Orchard. (Color illustrations.) U. S. Dept. Agr., Farmers' Bulletin 513. Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 25 cents.